

# **A First Ladies' Sampler**

**An Honors Thesis**

**by**

**Allison Holfinger**

**Ball State University  
Muncie, Indiana**

**December 2006**

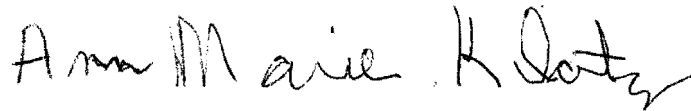
A First Ladies' Sampler

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Allison Holfinger

Advisor: Ann Marie Klotz

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ann Marie Klotz". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Ball State University  
Muncie, Indiana

December 2006

Graduation: December 17, 2006

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	1
Acknowledgements.....	1
Overview .....	2
Martha Washington.....	2-3
Frances Cleveland.....	3-5
Grace Coolidge.....	5-6
Eleanor Roosevelt.....	6-8
Laura Bush .....	8-9
Works Cited.....	10
Appendix: Documentation of creative project	

## Abstract

After enrolling in an Honors colloquium in the fall of 2005, covering the First Ladies of the United States of America, I was intrigued by the history of the families in the White House in connection with the times. After going home one weekend, I discovered in my mother's quilt book collection patterns for blocks symbolizing several First Ladies. To combine my love of history and of quilting, the following is a compilation of biographical information on five First Ladies and the history of quilting and fabrics during their individual time in the White House. The First Ladies covered are: Martha Washington, Frances Cleveland, Grace Coolidge, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Laura Bush. Those five were chosen for this project because the dates of which they were in the White House are well-spread throughout the history of America. Those five were also chosen because each had a block assigned to them in a series of quilt books. In addition to the written portion of the Thesis, I pieced and quilted the blocks assigned to the First Ladies into a sampler. The sampler would be a nice size for a wall-hanging quilt with only five pieced blocks. Documentation of that progress is included.

I find it important to combine the two topics of First Ladies and quilting to make a connection between females in power and a typically feminine hobby. Not only should Americans be aware of past Presidents, but they should also be aware of the women who stood at our leaders' side. Quilting is also an important topic in American history and is often considered an art movement.

## Acknowledgements

- I would like to thank Ann Marie Klotz for inspiring me to create the project for this Thesis and advising me during the process. She was incredibly supportive from beginning to end.
- I would also like to thank my mother for teaching me how to sew and quilt. It has become a hobby that she and I can share together as mother and daughter and as friends.

## Overview

The saying, “behind every great man is a great woman,” is proven to be true for almost every American President who had his wife alongside him during his time in the White House. The First Lady of America position is not elected by the people, nor are there specific duties for her role. However, standards have been established from each First Lady who has served behind her husband. First ladies have taken ideas from their predecessors, but no two have accomplished the same effect in the White House. Martha Washington, the first to have the role for America, had to decide of what the role should consist. Every First Lady since has had to meet the standard that Martha created, by being the hostess for the White House, the mother of the nation, the leader in female activities, and a supporter of a good cause. Frances Cleveland, Grace Coolidge, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Laura Bush are great examples of women who followed Martha’s precedence. In addition to being a First Lady, the above mentioned also defined how women of their times should spend their days. Martha, Frances, Grace, Eleanor, and Laura may have been women in power, but none of them abandoned the traditional sense of being a homemaker.

## Martha Washington

Born on June 2, 1731 to Frances and John Dandridge, Martha was brought up on a wealthy Virginian plantation (England 12, Boller 3). At the age of seventeen, she married Colonel Daniel Parke Custis, had four children with him, and, upon his death, she became one of the wealthiest widows in the Virginia colony (England 12). A year or two later, Martha met tall, handsome, and wealthy George Washington. They married in 1759 and, by combining each other’s wealth, were able to maintain their high social status (Boller 4). When the Revolutionary War began, Martha followed her General from battle to battle whenever she could, despite how uncommon it was for a woman to be at a military camp (England 13). Neither Martha nor George were especially thrilled about heading to New York when George became the first President of the new nation; yet, the couple always put their country before themselves (England 13).

Once at the nation’s capital, Martha honestly didn’t know how to act as the President’s wife. She couldn’t take on the role of being a queen, nor could she avoid the public’s eye. Martha fit in well as a hostess for her Friday night “drawing room” gatherings (Caroli 6). She

also was viewed as the ultimate mother of the nation, especially from her involvement with the troops during the Revolutionary War. After President Washington completed his second term, the famous couple could finally retire to Mount Vernon in 1797 (England 14). George died a few years later after catching a cold on a rainy day, and Martha followed a couple years later in 1802 (Boller 7-8).

While raised in a traditional time for females, Martha was taught at a young age how to sew, knit, embroider, and play music (England 12). Martha enjoyed her handiwork and was especially good at all of it. When she married George and moved to Mount Vernon, she personally trained the slaves on how to cook and sew (England 12). Martha also mended soldiers' socks and uniforms while attending camps with her husband (Boller 5). During her time as First Lady, quilts were only popular with those who had enough money to purchase them from Europe for decoration on walls or as large coverlets for their beds (Trestain 8, 14). The majority of quilts was made with white thread on white fabric (white on white) or had large floral designs in an ornate vase (Federico 17, 21). The first method of piecing a quilt was using appliqué, where fabrics were sewn on top of the base fabric (Federico 17). Popular designs on quilts were the Tree of Life, medallions, sunbursts, Nine-Patch, Pinwheels, floral and leaf motifs, and were often decorated with fringe or tassels (Trestain 14).

Although Martha Washington didn't stress her fashionableness, it is more than likely that most women of high-class society wore similar clothing. Fabrics for clothing were also used for quilts and furniture. Typical colors of the time were Indigo blue (a dependable dye), yellow backgrounds with blue designs, bright green, Robin's egg blue with floral designs, faded purples, Turkey red, and all shades of brown (Trestain 10-12). The limited variety was due to a lack of dependable dyes, fading after just a few washes. Print styles on fabrics were usually closely packed designs of florals, vines, trees, and panels of flowers in vases with borders on the edge of the panel (Trestain 13). Decorative fabrics were similar to prints found in China, India, and the French Provincial region (Trestain 14).

### Frances Cleveland

Born on July 21, 1864 in Buffalo, New York, Frances Folsom grew up to be a full figured, beautiful woman (England 24). When Frances was eleven years old, her father died in a horse and buggy accident, and she and her mother needed financial help (Boller 167). They

moved into Grover Cleveland's house because he was the law partner of Frances' father. Frances graduated from Wells College in 1885, and weeks later, stayed at the White House with her mother at the request of Grover (Caroli 104, England 24). The immediate rumor was that he proposed to Mrs. Folsom, but, after the mother and daughter returned from a trip to Europe, it was soon revealed that Grover had proposed to 21-year-old Frances (Boller 167). Their wedding was the first Presidential wedding at the White House; thirty guests attended, the Marine Band was led by John Philip Sousa, and the Navy gave a 21-shot salute (England 24, Boller 168).

As the youngest First Lady, Frances was the typical Victorian woman - gracious, dignified, and a model of simplicity and maturity. The press became a constant presence while the Clevelands were in office; Frances had a fence put around the White House during the second term to protect her children from continuous exposure (England 25). Frances was so loved by the people of America that her picture was placed on the 1892 campaign slightly above Grover and his running mate's pictures, and she may have been the reason her husband won the election (Boller 169). Five years after Grover's death in 1908, Frances remarried, becoming the first First Lady to remarry after the President's death (Caroli 105). Frances became blind at eighty years old, learned Braille, and corresponded with a blind Indian boy for a couple years (England 25). Frances died on October 29, 1947 at eighty-three years old.

Brought up during the Victorian era and college educated, Frances could speak three languages, read Latin, enjoyed music, and learned the basics of photography and needlework (England 25). Frances was considered a very fashionable person, and many women began dressing like her. With the invention, and then commonness, of the sewing machine, dresses became more complex in construction (Fons 22). Typical colors during Frances' time in the White House were coppers, cinnamon pinks, dark brown, golden yellows, purples, soft pinks, Turkey red, deep orange, and mauves (Trestain 68-70). During the second term, lavender, navy, burgundy, and bright colors on black backgrounds became popular (Trestain 94-97). The styles of those colors were usually in stripes, plaids, paisleys, floral sprays, polka dots, Gingham, and houndstooth (Trestain 71, 97). Fabrics tended to be beautifully decorated, and "even over-decorated" during the Victorian era (Trestain 67).

Quilts of the time were very rare to last for more than a couple years because fabric was made so cheaply (Trestain 99). The focus of handiwork was on embroidery, cross-stitching, and Redwork (the use of red thread on white fabric). After the Philadelphia Exposition in 1876, the

crazy quilt fad stemmed from the exposure of Japanese design (Fons 25). These quilts were made of scraps from dresses and silk, and sewn together randomly. Decorative stitchwork with fancy threads covered the seams. Other popular patterns were Log Cabin, Wild Goose Chase, Mariner's Compass, and Amish in origin (Trestain 72, 101). The most popular quilting technique was to tie the three layers of the top, batting, and backing fabric together with wool ties, and large arcs and echoing appeared by using the sewing machine.

### Grace Coolidge

Born on January 3, 1879 to Lemira and Andrew Goodhue, Grace was determined to care for those less fortunate. She enrolled into the University of Vermont to teach at the Clark School for the Deaf (England 14). Grace was a warm, friendly, outgoing, and cheerful person, which all proved to be useful upon marriage to Calvin Coolidge in 1905 (Boller 254). Calvin Coolidge was a quiet introvert who was determined to make a career out of politics. Grace and Calvin first saw each other while she was watering flowers and he was shaving in his underwear one summer day (Boller 254). They soon met through a mutual friend, and were soon engaged and married (Boller 255). Before Calvin became Governor of Massachusetts, Grace and their children stayed home in Northampton, Vermont, as a way for Calvin to remain frugal (Boller 257). Once Calvin became Governor, the family made the move to Boston, which couldn't had been at a better political time for Calvin. Grace became Calvin's communicator; she made friends for him, charmed the public, and spread the word about Calvin's ambitions (Boller 258).

Once at the White House, Grace proved herself even more a friendly asset to Calvin. She played a great hostess for many dinners and receptions, creating an enjoyable, fun environment where no one said a bad thing about her (Boller 260). Grace was liked immediately by everyone who met her, and she was soon on newspaper and magazine's lists of admired women (Caroli 168). Although she never expressed her political opinion, Grace supported her husband despite people's complaints on his lack of personality (Caroli 171). Calvin restarted his law practice after leaving the White House, while Grace moved back to Northampton, doing housework, remaining active with the Red Cross and the Clarke School for the Deaf, and writing poetry. Upon Calvin's death in 1933, Grace felt empty at first, but soon continued her charity work, traveled to Europe, and became Boston Red Sox's "number one fan" (Boller 263). Grace died of heart failure on July 9, 1957 (Boller 264).



Soon after marrying Calvin, Grace found many socks of his that had holes in them (Boller 256). She immediately began darning them and happily continued her life as a homemaker, despite her beginning failures as a cook (Boller 256). As Grace's cooking skills improved, she began sewing and crocheting; she even crocheted a coverlet for the Lincoln bedroom when the White House was renovated (Caroli 171). Although Grace was not particularly into setting fashion trends, she did charity work and encouraged donations to the Girl Scouts and especially the Red Cross. The Red Cross pulled most of its donations from quilt raffles, where quilts were signed by those who offered the time and money for the quilt to be raffled (Fons 28). Signature quilts were created during the First World War and grew in popularity by the time the Second World War came about. Other quilt patterns were taken from women's magazines, standardizing the names of quilt blocks (Fons 29). With the patented electric sewing machine in 1905, the construction of quilt blocks became more complex. The most popular patterns had curves, such as Double Wedding Ring, Dresden Plate, Grandmother's Flower Garden, and Fans (Trestain 134). Other popular blocks of the time were the Pineapple and Star of Bethlehem (Fons 29). The most common quilt blocks were considered Colonial Revival, the traditional blocks during the American Colonization (Fons 28). Due to the difficulty of these patterns, many quilts were not completed, leaving blocks and the top of quilts in baskets; however, if the quilt was finished, it was very simply quilted, usually by stitch-in-the-ditch (over top of seam lines) (Trestain 134).

Popular colors for quilts during this time were very bright or were pastels (Fons 31). The most common colors were red, dusty rose, double pinks (pink design on pink background), yellows, purples, and mint green (Trestain 130, 131). Due to better technology of textile making and the use of dyes, prints became very complex, showing cartoon designs and geometric figures. Other popular designs on fabric were fine wavy lines, crosshatching, large flowers with vines filling in space, and the use of contrasting colors to create a designed effect (Trestain 132, 133).

### Eleanor Roosevelt

Born October 11, 1884, Anna Eleanor Roosevelt, daughter of Elliot and Anna Hall Roosevelt, had a rough childhood from many factors. First, she was the niece of President Theodore Roosevelt, and was often an outcast from activities and conversations. Second, her

mother was one of the most beautiful women in the region, and Eleanor inherited none of those good looks (Boller 285). Third, her mother died when Eleanor was eight, and her beloved father, the only person who truly cherished Eleanor, died two years later from drunkenness (Boller 285). At age 15, Eleanor was sent to Europe by her Grandmother Hall for a proper education (Caroli 186). This time away helped Eleanor gain confidence and produced a vision for her life, though she returned to marry and start a family. In November 1903, she became engaged to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, her fourth cousin (Boller 287). Only a short thirteen years and five children later, Eleanor discovered, in 1918, that Franklin was having an affair with Lucy Mercer, her social secretary (Boller 289). This affair devastated Eleanor, but she remained a devoted wife to him and began her own movements for societal change.

When Franklin was first elected President, Eleanor knew that she would not be the average First Lady; instead, Eleanor wanted to continue her involvement in political matters, whether with her husband or on her own. Since Franklin was crippled by Polio, Eleanor acted as his legs, by inspecting Washington's slums and other areas hit hard by the Great Depression, visiting American troops in Europe during World War II, and campaigning vigorously across the country (Caroli 191). Eleanor even took her try in journalism by writing a column, "My Day," to tell the American people what she did as First Lady (Boller 296). This column was completely different than what a First Lady several terms before her would have written; she didn't discuss parties that she hosted or shopping trips. Eleanor used this opportunity to show her positions on social issues and what she was doing about them. Eleanor was no longer a "stay-at-home mom," receiving criticism from many people. Even upon Franklin's death in 1945, Eleanor continued her political career, especially when President Truman appointed her as Ambassador to the United Nations, until her death on November 7, 1962 (Caroli 200).

Eleanor may have been a mother of five, but she lacked many domestic skills. If it hadn't been for her servants and dominating mother-in-law, then Eleanor simply could not have raised her children. There has been a tale of her hanging her first child out of the window in a sling because she heard that children needed fresh air often. Eleanor was not alone in lacking domestic skills because more women were receiving education outside of the home during the Roosevelts' time in the White House. Because of the Depression, new fabric was scarce, and quilts were made out of old clothes. When the Second World War came around, quilting was

saved for the poor women to make because other women, mostly in urban areas, joined the work effort to make supplies for the troops (Trestain 161).

When quilts weren't made out of necessity, they were made for competitions and monetary prizes (Trestain 160). Popular patterns for those quilts were found in newspapers or were appliquéd patterns, such as Sunbonnet Sue, pansies, and butterflies (Trestain 167). Cross-stitching and embroidery kits were sold, where the pattern was already on the fabric and thread was provided with the kit. Quilting was very minimal because the batting was considered too thin to need extensive quilting, leading to many tied quilts (Trestain 168). Fabric colors during the Great Depression and World War II were Nile green, mint green, olive green and khaki (inspired by the military), navy blue, red and white, golden yellow, lilac, teal green, browns with purple, and a variety of pinks (Trestain 162, 163). Print styles tended to be very busy with contrasting colors, large florals and circular designs, polka dots, black outlined prints, and metallic thread woven into the fabric (Trestain 165).

### Laura Bush

Born on November 4, 1946 to Harold and Jenna Welch in Midland, Texas, Laura always did “what really traditional women do” (Gerhart 13). After her horrifying senior year in high school, where she hit and killed a fellow classmate, Laura headed to the Southern Methodist University to become an elementary teacher (Gerhart 3, 32). Through the riotous Vietnam War era, Laura remained conservative and cautious in her life (Gerhart 32). Laura traveled to Europe after graduation, had her first teaching job at an inner city school, and decided to go back to college for a master's degree in library studies (Gerhart 35). At this point in her life, many people believed that Laura would become an old maid; that could have been true, but she met the “Bush boy.” George W. Bush may have been the son of a rich, New England-educated oilman, but he was funny and caring. Laura and George married a short twelve weeks after meeting each other, on November 5, 1977 (Gerhart 49).

As soon as they were married, GW jumped into the political scene, with Laura by his side editing his speeches and making a few of her own. Laura had the makings of a First Lady of any position George would take on, as she “could glide through the messiest of times, composed and controlled,” whether she enjoyed what she was doing or not (Gerhart ix). After the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C., Laura shined as the new First

Lady, becoming the “consoler-in-chief” or comforting mother of the nation (Wertheimer 236). Laura has produced a nurturing image since then by encouraging education, especially reading skills, for America’s youth, focusing on the need to preserve and restore historical landmarks, and raising awareness to women about heart disease (Wertheimer 236).

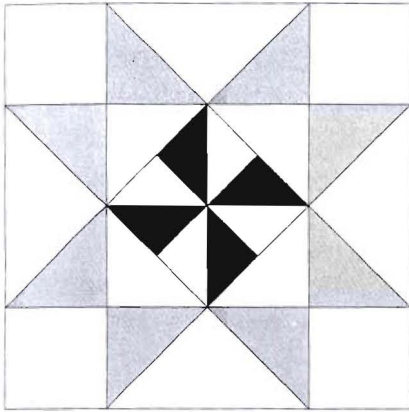
Although Laura has her traditional tendencies, she is the perfect First Lady to guide women into the twenty-first century because she has lived both worlds of homemaker and career-woman. In the same fashion that the roles of women have evolved, quilting methods have also evolved. Today, there are no standards for quilting, allowing all sorts of quilts to be highly appreciated; traditional patterns are still made, but very modern and artistic designs are also created. Popular traditional patterns include the Log Cabin, Nine-Patch, Lone Star, and Dresden Plate. The newest quilting method is to paint on top of the fabric and sew on embellishments, giving quilts a multi-dimensional look and becoming an emotion-filled masterpiece.

Quilting techniques vary, especially with the acceptance of long arm machine quilting, where an industrial-sized sewing machine can be electronically programmed to repeat the same quilting pattern all over the quilt. Since there is such a blend of quilting styles and great technological advances, there are no popular patterns or colors of fabric. All options are used equally. Fabrics today, though, have a variety of designs on them, whether they are flowers, cats, houses, or musical instruments. Most traditional patterned quilts are two-tones, where a neutral color is used with a bright color. Popular colors of quilts are all shades of green, yellow, and red. Nothing about quilting as really changed, in the same manner that the role of First Lady hasn’t really changed. Quilts are still used for decoration, as during Martha Washington’s nurturing time, and for competitions and raffles, as during Eleanor Roosevelt’s social change time and Grace Coolidge’s supporting time, respectively. Scrap quilts and embellishments are also just as common, as during Frances Cleveland’s fashionable time.

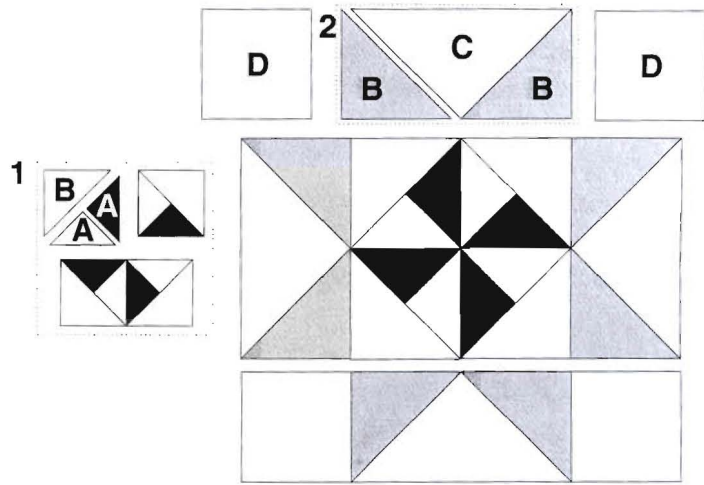
Works Cited

- Boller, Paul F., Jr. Presidential Wives: An Anecdotal History. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Caroli, Betty Boyd. First Ladies. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- England, Kay. Voices of the Past: A History of Women's Lives in Patchwork. Carmel, Indiana: Kay England Publications, 1994.
- England, Kaye. Voices of the Past: A History of Women's Lives in Patchwork, Volume II. Carmel, Indiana: Kaye England Publications, 1998.
- Federico, Jean Taylor. The Artist and the Quilt: American Quilts 1770-1880. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983.
- Fons, Marianne. Fons and Porter Presents Quilts from The Henry Ford. Urbandale, Iowa: Landauer Corporation, 2005.
- Gerhart, Ann. The Perfect Wife: The Life and Choices of Laura Bush. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004.
- Trestain, Eileen Jahnke. Dating Fabrics: A Color Guide, 1800-1960. Paducah, KY: American Quilter's Society, 1998.
- Wertheimer, Molly Meijer. Leading Ladies of the White House. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005.

# Martha Washington



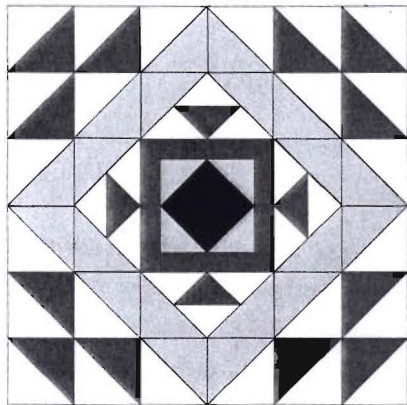
Martha Washington's Star  
(12" block)



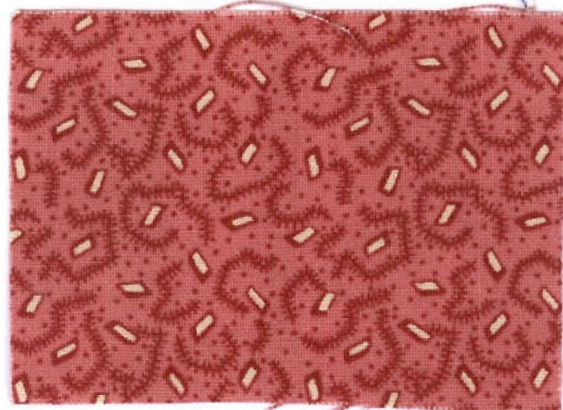
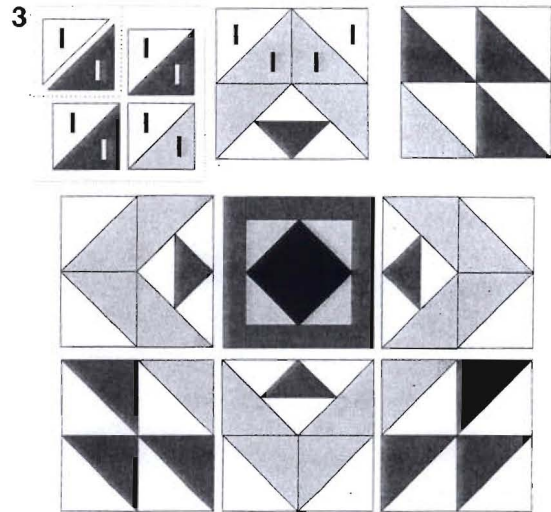
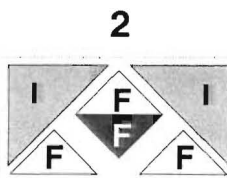
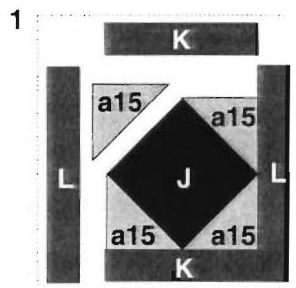




# Frances Cleveland



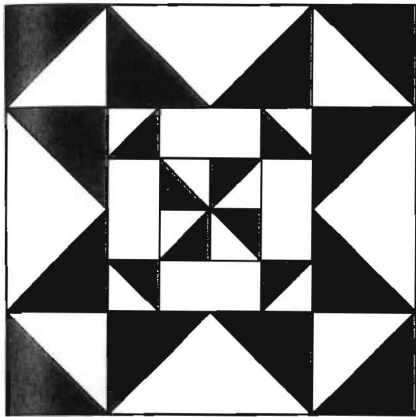
Mrs. Cleveland's Choice  
(12" block)



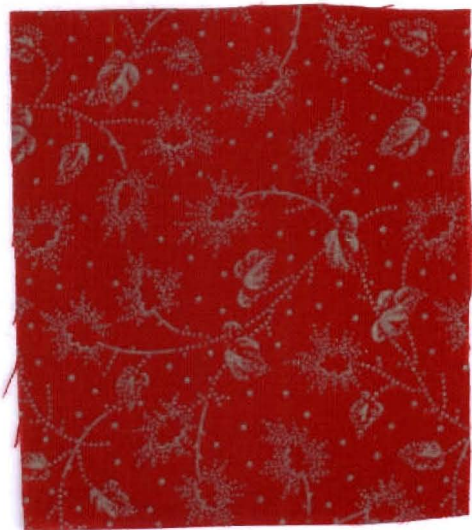
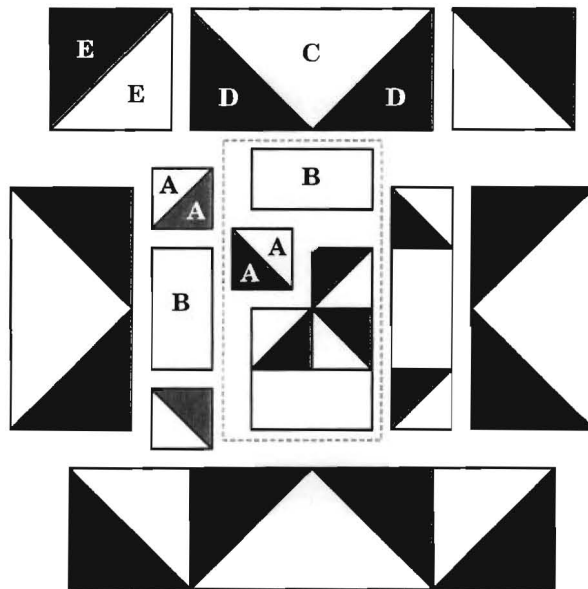




# Grace Anna Goodhue Coolidge

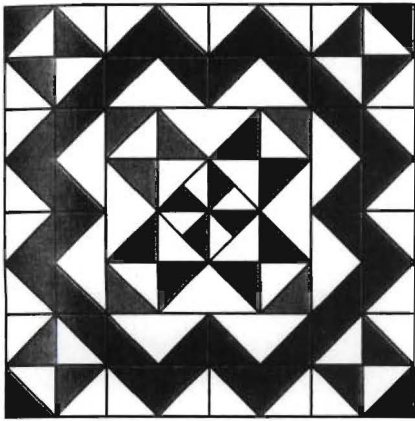


Grace Coolidge  
(12" Block)

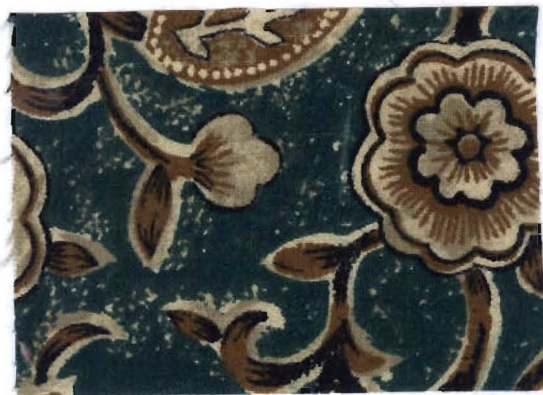
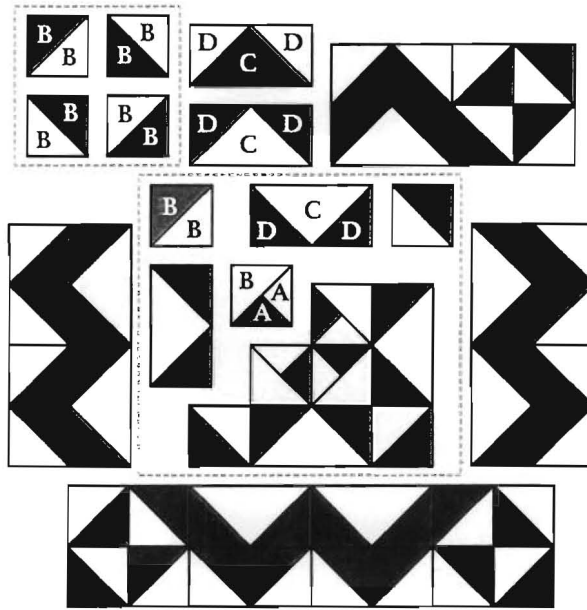




# Anna Eleanor Roosevelt

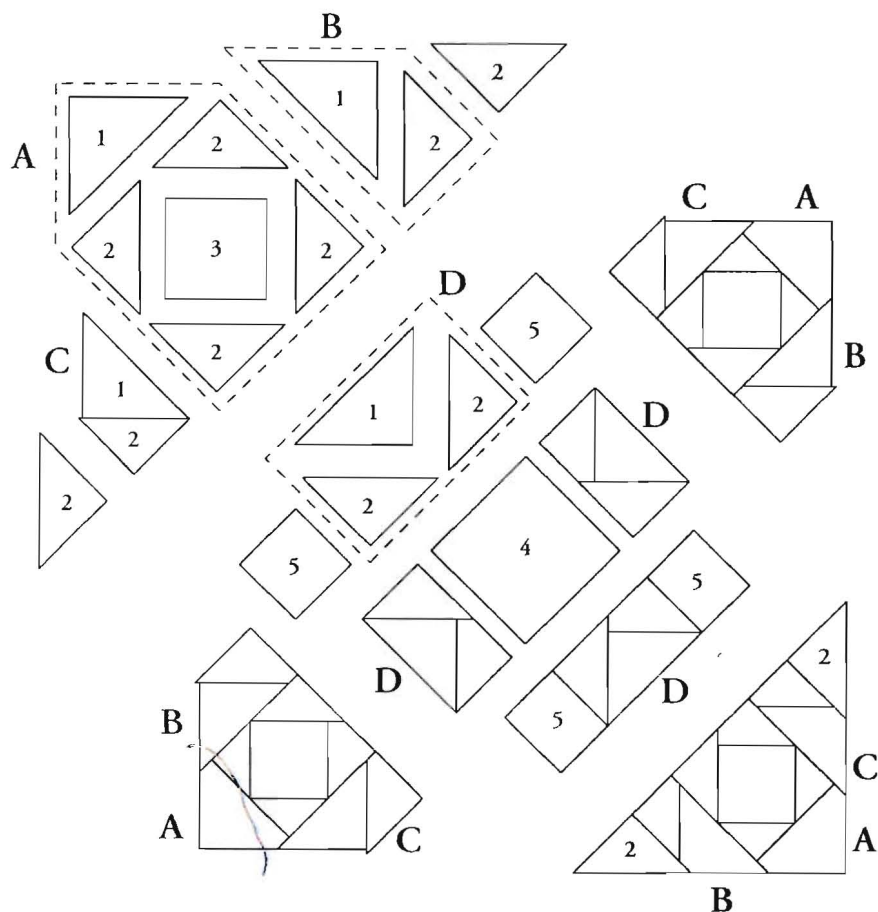


Eleanor Roosevelt  
(12" Block)









31

• Make four each of indicated "A", "B", and "C" sections. Note that the "B" and "C" sections are mirror images of each other.

• Attach a "C" section to the left of each "A" section and a "B" section to the right.

• Attach a number 2 triangle to each side of two of these pieces.

• Make four of the "D" sections and attach a number 5 square to each side of two of these.

• Combine the pieces as shown.





